Share a night of greatness

By Bob Goepfert

ALBANY — It can be very hard to convince people to overcome their preconceptions.

In the arts, most people don't pre-judge an entertainer, but they will dismiss an entire genre. For example, it would be very difficult for someone to coax me to attend an accordion concert or convince me that a festival of mime is a way to spend a weekend.

Before I attended Jay O'Callahan's performance at Capital Rep, I felt much the same way about storytellers. Too often, at a storyteller performance, I've felt like a school kid, as the person telling the story offers a bland tale with a sing-song delivery using exaggerated gestures.

I say "felt" that way, not "feel," because I'm a convert. O'Callahan's performance dispelled my prejudice. He tells stories that are mature, dramatic and enthralling experiences. And he does it effortlessly and with dramatic understatement.

I could call what he does a one-person show, but we've all been burnt with that category before, too.

No, O'Callahan is not a monologist, he's a one-man stage production. He doesn't try to act his many characters; he simply creates them.

He uses a minimalist style of performance that trusts the audience and keeps the focus on the material. If ever there was an example of less is more in the theater, it is O'Callahan's performance.

Just as important as the way he tells a story are the stories he tells. During his stay at Capital Rep through Sunday, O'Callahan will always tell "Pouring the Sun" as the opening act. Don't miss it. It is American history as it should be taught in school.

O'Callahan was commissioned to create a story about the steel industry in Bethlehem, Penn., and after years of interviews, he was still blocked on how to tell this complicated tale of how an industry so dominated by many lives. Then he met Ludvika Waldrup and found the humanity that a story about a harsh industry needs.

The story takes place on Ludvika's 65th birthday, and her family is gathered to celebrate. It's a festive time, and Ludvika looks back on her life in the United States from the time she arrived here as a 18-year-old immigrant from Poland.

This story belongs to Ludvika, but it is one almost every family can share. It is about hope and optimism, life and death, sharing and sacrificing. "Pouring the Sun" is about opportunity and community as well as oppression and greed. It is the American Dream, warts and all.

The second half of the show is called the "Pill Hill Stories" and is about O'Callahan's youth growing up near Boston. He has five tales in this group, but he alternates the stories usually telling two a performance.

Opening night he told "Chickie," which can be thought of a coming-of-age story. The other was "Equations," a delightful tale about a party going wrong and ending up right.

The stories share the same values that are expressed in "Pouring the Sun," but they are told in a lighter, more nostalgic manner.

They make wonderful companion pieces, as together we see America as it was throughout the 20th century.

Ludvika's story is about becoming American and actually forging America. It is about living in a world where a job was precious and the pay low. It takes us through 1954, which is about the period the "Pill Hill Stories" take place.

In the second set of stories, we see a society that struggles less but is still tentative about its identity.

Both the "Pill Hill" stories are about friendship, caring for your neighbor and finding a way to fit into a society that is defining itself as it evolves. What is consistent in both parts of the evening is the value structure expressed by those we meet.

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